

May 31, 2001

Reply to:
Keith R Palmer
87-131 Kulahanai Place
Waianae, HI 96792-3362

Donna Weiting, Chief
Marine Mammal Conservation Division
Office of Protected Resources
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 Ease-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3226

Re: 66 FR 15375, Proposed Rule for the Taking of Marine Mammals Incidental to Navy Operations OF SURTASS LFA Sonar

Dear Ms. Weiting,

I attended the recent meeting for public comment at the Marriot Hotel in Waikiki, Honolulu, April 28, 2001. As a taxpayer and Navy veteran who spent eight years serving in the US Navy, I would like to state my reasoned opposition to the deployment in any form of LFAS for several reasons. Additionally although the scope of the permit is limited to impact on marine mammals the need for such a system at this time, balanced against the costs in money and harm to the environment is unjustified.

The impact on rare species of whales is not known and cannot be determined from what testing has occurred by the Navy. The fact is there are rare whales that are seldom seen, individuals of which are seen at one location, say off Labrador, and then the next known sighting is six months later in the Caribbean. These whales travel enormous distances, and yet their behavior allows them to congregate for mating and perhaps migration. The obvious effects of interfering with their hearing would be to possibly render endangered or even drive extinct a species. Killing of whales would be the most extreme impact, deafening would also prevent normal behavior, and masking of whale communications another. Altering their singing pattern to prevent normal communication would be another impact that would not actually kill a whale but would prevent them from conducting normal activities.

The Navy has to implement a system of independent trained observers if it is to use this system. The Navy cannot be trusted to police itself. If the permit is granted with exceptions to only operate in a particular area after sweeping for animals, to limit output to a pre defined level, and other restrictions to limit impact on the marine mammal fauna of the world's oceans, then some person not paid for by the agency being monitored must be there to check these things. The Sierra Club, Green Peace, or National Resources Defense Council or all three would have approval over who is allowed to do the monitoring, to ensure the public's interests are not co-opted by appointees from the military or anti-environmental ranks.

Thirdly, understanding of the actual operational area of the proposed system should be made clear before any permit is granted. The actual threat the LFAS is designed to eliminate is of extremely low noise submarines, which at this time consist of electric powered boats, that is old submarines that can run on diesel piston engines and then run on electric batteries for stealth. The threat consists of these boats operating undetected nearby the coast of an operational theater, the coast of the United States of America, or in a theater of operation off a foreign country where our forces are engaged, for instance India, mainland China, or anywhere else. The point being that the nature of submarine tactics in these situations would be near shore. The detection system provided by LFAS would most likely then be used NOT in open ocean sweeping for enemy submarines. It would most likely be used for sweeping of near shore environments with topographically complex structures as estuarine canyons and continental shelf areas allowing the quiet submarines to hide undetected. Therefore the necessity of sweeping these large coastal areas, no doubt for hundreds of miles, would impact all marine mammals offshore these areas. This means all the whales, dolphins, walruses, seals and fish in the area would be subjected to intense noise. The reality is that this operation could render many of these animals dead or deaf, and a deaf whale is not going to be able to survive or reproduce.

The nature of the system appears to result in much higher received levels of sound than I have seen mentioned at the hearing. Due to the unique, new, phased array propagation technology of the phased array sonar, the acoustical noise could be focused at distances far beyond one mile from the projecting ships. The true distance at which this system can operate may be being concealed from the public under the guise of a security issue. However, in order to make a competent review some ball park range of the actual impact area of the noise must be considered. In this case a suggestion of one hundred miles from the originating ship at a level high enough to damage marine mammal hearing might be a good working starting point for environmental review.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is tasked with a detailed review of a new and highly technical military system. NMFS also spends much of its time trying to work with fishing organizations. It is not primarily a protection agency. I would expect that you would seek out and consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in regards to the impact on rare and endangered species and impact on coastal environments. Careful and detailed consultation with the US Environmental Protection Agency is also another function that the public expects to be undertaken in this matter.

The LFAS SURTASS system presents an entirely new type of technology used by the military in the oceans. The passive systems to date appear harmless to ocean life since they look for noise instead of generating it. The present active sonars are considerably less able to focus energy. This new system should be viewed as a real, potential threat to the entire marine mammal fauna of the world. It should not be developed. As a taxpayer I am upset and unhappy that the US Navy violated the law in developing this system to a point of building a ship and planning a ship system without the required environmental review. Cloaking this huge project by claiming it has to be developed in secrecy and away from public review, whether valid or not, makes it that much more important that the impact it might cause be thoroughly understood.

I urge you to deny the permit, entirely.

Thank-you for your time and consideration.



Keith R Palmer